

# Climate Crisis on our Plates

## The Crumbling Foundations of Global Food Systems



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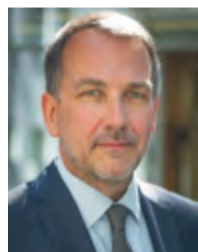


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The European summer for many is synonymous with the Mediterranean lifestyle of sun, beach, and good food. The lifeblood of this cuisine is olive oil. However, the generous drizzle of this liquid gold over a Caprese salad is now to be taken quite literally. In just one year, the price of olive oil in the EU has surged by 50%. This spike is due to the heatwaves that have plagued southern Europe in recent years. An Italian producers' association is warning of a 50% drop in the harvest for 2024. This is the climate crisis, and we see its impact on our shopping bills. However, behind these rising prices lies a fragile food production system that is neither sustainable nor future-proof. The abundance of European supermarkets often masks the fragility of these global food systems. Previously, it was the prices of staple foods like sunflower oil and wheat flour that exponentially increased. The war against Ukraine caused one of the largest exporters to collapse overnight. As an American science journalist and author David Wallace-Wells describes in an essay in the *New York Times*, the extreme price swings in food are the seismographs of our food system. When they spike, we can be sure that somewhere in the world, the tectonic plates of global food supply are shifting,

often with the most severe consequences for those with the least means—the people struggling to get food on their plates.

### Global Food Systems: A House of Cards

This fragility is largely due to the global diet being concentrated on a few staple foods. Wheat, corn, and rice make up 40% of the world's consumed calories. The bulk of production is limited to a few states, and many other countries depend on their successful harvests and favourable exports. When this delicate system is disrupted, the effects are felt worldwide. Therefore, if wheat fields in Ukraine are destroyed by war or harvests are scorched by a heatwave in India, the prices of this global staple and its alternatives rise. Daily bread becomes suddenly unaffordable for millions.

**That high olive oil prices are not only a tolerable nuisance, they are also a harbinger of the necessary change in how we feed ourselves**

Currently, 309 million people are acutely hungry, and over 700 million suffer from chronic food insecurity. And although hunger is not a problem of quantity, but of fair distribution and affordable prices, yet the already fragile food systems could entirely collapse if the supply of a broad range of products were to fail permanently. Worldwide, agricultural productivity growth has decreased from 65% to 35% because of in-

creasing temperatures and other impacts of the climate crisis. This creates a vicious cycle, as food production requires intact nature but also fuels its destruction. The current structure of our food systems contributes to more than a quarter of all climate-damaging emissions—through farming, logistics, and the waste of up to 36% of the products. Moreover, our current food industry is wreaking havoc on ecosystems, accelerating species extinction, and eroding biodiversity. This means that if we exceed the planetary boundaries, our environment could change irreversibly, making a life of social and economic prosperity impossible. It sounds paradoxical, but the way we feed ourselves today leads to hunger, endangers our future food security, and thus threatens our very survival.

### Food is Security

In the big scheme of things, skyrocketing olive oil prices seem trivial in comparison to the **urgent need to overhaul our climate-damaging and nature-hostile food production systems**. This is evident where the climate crisis exacerbates conflicts over scarce resources. When people have little, they are reliant on a healthy environment for survival. When the environment is destroyed, the foundation needed to achieve other development goals like peace, justice, or food security is lost. This can accelerate negative dynamics in fragile states and destabilise entire regions. Therefore, **combating hunger must be part of a broader security policy** that includes human and environmental security as a foundation for the

stability of our planet, as nearly 40% of the world's population now lives in areas heavily affected by the climate crisis.

Functioning ecosystems can slow down these developments. The key to intact nature lies in the soil. Without healthy soil, there is no vegetation; without vegetation, there is no food; without food, there is hunger, migration, and destabilization as the struggle for survival erodes the social fabric of communities.

### Small Farmers, Big Impact

The programmes of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) in the Sahel demonstrate what solutions look like in resource-poor regions facing interconnected challenges like conflict, hunger, and extremism. Since 2018, WFP, together with affected village communities, has rehabilitated over 400,000 football fields worth of land using simple agricultural methods. The reclaimed land is farmed by smallholder farmers, who are responsible for much of the food production in sub-Saharan Africa and have the potential to preserve the biosphere in the long term. These farmers primarily grow traditional, regional crops like sorghum, which, unlike wheat or corn, are far more resistant to extreme weather and can sequester carbon from the air, storing it deep in the soil. Nearly 70% of these smallholder farmers are women. As WFP also supports schoolchildren in these communities with daily hot meals, the women farmers can sell their produce to local schools. This investment in local food systems makes fragile states more in-